

The Non-Profit Sector's Pilgrims — And Heretics

by Dan Pallotta

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Why do people work for nonprofit organizations? It's not because we became impassioned at some young age by the nonprofit sector. College students don't demonstrate for the purity of the nonprofit ideal. They demonstrate for *causes* – like ending the suffering in Darfur or finding a cure for AIDS. None of us got involved in this work because of our love of the tax status under which we operate. We got involved because human suffering is not okay with us, and because we wanted to stop it.

A recent blog post by Phil Buchanan, the president of Duke's Center for Effective Philanthropy, takes issue with my book *Uncharitable* as well as Matthew Bishop's *Philanthrocapitalism*. His post, titled "The Attack on Philanthropy," represents a point of view held by traditionalists in the sector. Freeing the nonprofit sector to use the tools of capitalism as I advocate, Buchanan believes, poses "a real danger that an appreciation of the nonprofit sector's distinctive identity and purpose will be lost."

I don't believe that women dying of AIDS in Africa or kids dying of diarrhea in Bangladesh care about the nonprofit sector's distinctive identity or that they want it to have any purpose other than finding a cure for AIDS and getting them clean water, and damn fast.

The intentions on both sides of the argument are good. The traditionalists believe that the present nonprofit form is society's counterbalance; it is the only thing that stands between the world and its total subjugation to a private sector fueled by capitalism;

between suffering and more suffering. In their view, the current form keeps things from getting worse, and so they want to preserve the status quo. The rest of us believe that the nonprofit form, as currently constrained, keeps things from getting better. It stands between suffering and ending suffering. We want to change the world, and quickly.

And no one who wants to change the world can say with a straight face that today's nonprofit rulebook has us on a trajectory to that future. The sector is merely trying to keep its head above water.

The world deserves better.

The word “profit” comes from the Latin for progress, so the phrase, “nonprofit,” means, literally, “nonprogress.” It was a moniker hung around the neck of the sector by Massachusetts's first governor, John Winthrop. In his famous sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” delivered on his way to the new world, he specifically conflated charity and the lack of profit (yes, that's where it comes from, folks) when he wrote that if the Puritans pursued their “pleasure and profitts,” they would “surely perish out of the good land” they were crossing the sea to “posess.”

We are here to change the world, not to protect the purity of John Winthrop's 400 year-old nonprofit ideas. As we consider these two wildly different contexts, we would do well to recall John Winthrop's vision for the future, which he outlined in the beginning of his famous sermon:

“God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind as in all times some must be rich some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity others mean and in submission...so that the rich and the mighty should not eat up the poor nor the poor and despised rise up against their superiors and shake off their yoke.”

That was his vision, and he developed a model to suit it. We have a different vision, and we need a new model to achieve it. The Puritans thought social conditions were fixed. We believe they can change, dramatically, and that's why we do this work. That's why *I* do it anyway. How about you?

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